

## REVIEWS

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P. Kevin MacKeown, *Early China Coast Meteorology: The Role of Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press (Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Studies Series), 2010, xvi, 289 pp.

### Brian Morton

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The author of this book, Kevin MacKeown, a former teacher and now an honorary professor in the Department of Physics at the University of Hong Kong, has embarked upon and completed a meticulously researched study of the history of the Hong Kong Observatory. Far from being a dull factual history of an institution and the infrastructure that housed it, MacKeown has focussed on the personalities of the personages, both high and low, that were involved in the observatory's foundation and the early years of its work. As a consequence, the reader is introduced to a living, breathing, organisational structure whose fabric laid the basis for the future distinguished career of the observatory and its dedicated staff and, sometimes, eminent directors. The story MacKeown tells is undertaken also with the man's characteristically droll wit and telling asides which reveal how not all the researches that scholars undertake are bone-dry but can be both amusing and enlightening.

The book commences (Chapter 1) with a factual history of weather reporting in China and elsewhere in South Asia and of the observatories that were established notably at Zikawei (of various spellings) in Shanghai and in Manila, the Philippines, in the middle part of the nineteenth century – the latter being most important to the history of weather forecasting in Hong Kong. Both observatories were established by Jesuits, who through, arguably, either no or little fault of their own, laid the seeds for the early problems of Hong Kong's fledgling institution. The need for an

observatory in Hong Kong was forcefully emphasised by the large typhoon that struck the, similarly fledgling, colony in September 1874 with the loss of more than 2,500 lives. Accordingly, Chapter 2 delves into the complex machinations, within and between the Hong Kong Government and its London controller—the Colonial Office—to establish the framework upon which such an institution could be rendered of service not only to the people of Hong Kong but also the fast-growing shipping fraternity that were the *raison d'être* for the colony's establishment. First mooted by Dr J. De La Rue in 1877 after the above typhoon, Hong Kong's surveyor general, J.M. Price not only picked up on the idea but, also, canvassed support for an observatory and produced a plan to create it with the endorsement of his supporter, the then Governor, John Pope Hennessy. The remainder of this chapter details the political games and to-ing and fro-ing between Hong Kong and London with regard not only to the establishment of an observatory, but also its functions, costings (both capital and recurrent), staffing levels and their future responsibilities.

The decision to proceed with the project having been made by 1882, the search began for an observatory director, and Chapter 3 deals with the eventual appointee. This was to be the Danish citizen Dr A.W. Doberck then working at the Markree Observatory in Ireland. The Hong Kong and Colonial Office were advised with regard to a suitable appointee by the Astronomer Royal and it is this title, astronomer, for that is what Doberck was, that is key to the problems and antagonisms this, by virtually every account, arrogant, pugnacious, self-important and self-serving and solitary, but also highly intelligent and (astronomically) competent, director was and would continue to be. MacKeown discusses the duties of the observatory director on pages 62-64 of the book and these included the daily hoisting of an accurate time ball for all to set their clocks by, meteorological data gathering and dispersion once analysed, and the setting up of a tide recorder. In hindsight, and surprisingly overlooked, was a responsibility for weather forecasting. An omission that in the years ahead came to haunt all the authorities and Hong Kong's people as expressed vociferously in local newspapers. Also omitted was a reference to astronomy that along with religious matters would act to confound Doberck's first love and hatred of, respectively.

The director of the observatory arrived in Hong Kong in 1883 and Chapter 4 deals with the above key problems. Doberck considered and addressed himself as the Government Astronomer whereas the government appointed him as the Director of the Observatory. Doberck considered meteorological work to be beneath him. To such an extent that although commanded to visit and form working acquaintanceships with his peers at the other China Coast and Asian observatories, he declined to

do so. MacKeown does not say so, but to this reader, it seems likely that Doberck had a Lutheran upbringing. And, since this church was not being established in China by missionaries until 1915, he obviously did not need its ministration and was probably, thus, an atheist too. As a consequence, Doberck was imbued with contempt for the 'amateur' Jesuit directors of these observatories. In the event, he refused contact with all of them. On page 87, MacKeown identifies the crucial role played by Captain Robert FitzRoy, in the post H.M.S. *Beagle* years and before his suicide in 1865, in constructing large-scale synoptic weather charts and thereby becoming the father of modern forecasting. On this basis, Hong Kong people expected, rightfully, to be warned of forecasted storms and a system of such signals was created by Doberck, which, along with the firing of a gun to announce the imminent arrival of a strong storm or typhoon, was a step in the right direction.

Notwithstanding, Doberck's refusal to countenance co-operation with other Asian and Jesuit observatories, particularly Manila, led to many wrong or late forecasts and much public scorn. As MacKeown points out, not all such errors were of Doberck's making, however, but where typhoons are concerned, the public had only one person against whom they could direct their ire. This led to huge correspondences and as MacKeown puts it 'universal dissatisfaction' with the director personally and the work of the observatory in general. Thus, there followed numerous official enquiries into him as documented in Chapter 5. Doberck's solution to the meteorological problem was the appointment of his sister Anna as his assistant who would be at his 'beck and call any hour of the day or night.' A telling justification one feels. The government's decision not to accede to this request led to the appointment of a chief assistant in the form of one J.I. Plummer—albeit another astronomer and the candidate initially endorsed by Doberck but, foreseeably, not subsequently upon arrival. Quickly, Plummer also considered the meteorological work to be beneath him and the two men fell out.

Chapter 6 deals with the important subject of typhoons and the history of their Asian forecasting. Doberck considered himself an authority on the subject and wrote a book—his *Law of Storms in the Eastern Seas*. Though much praised by himself, Doberck was not, by any means, a mariner and those who were ridiculed it. The forecasting abilities of the observatory were, however, saved by one F.G. Figg who, a mild-mannered and 'head down' hardworking assistant, soon obtained Doberck's trust as meteorological manager. This side-lined Plummer and allowed Doberck to slowly, as his Hong Kong career egg-timed away, entrust the running of the, eventually, entire observatory to Figg. Eventually too, Anna Doberck was appointed and took over the responsibility of visiting ships when they

arrived in port and extracting weather data from their logs. In this, she was fastidious, accumulating over her long association with the observatory, almost half a million sets of data that allowed her to construct pilot charts. Sadly, however, this work came to naught and her efforts and dedication were forgotten.

Chapter 7 deals with Doberck's clashes with the Manila Jesuits although, in truth, with Figg and Anna on staff, the observatory was running much more smoothly and efficiently. It is in the light of these two assiduous persons that the eventual recognition of the institution should be seen. Doberck's adversarial approach to the authorities in Hong Kong but also his hatred of the Jesuits, compounded by the, in hindsight, silly mistake of his (and Plummer's) appointments as astronomers lay at the root of the observatory's teething problems. Doberck resigned his post in 1907, unacclaimed and un-missed, to retire to astronomy and disappear ultimately from history, particularly Hong Kong's. Fittingly, Figg was appointed to replace him, retiring himself in 1912 after a service of 29 years although Anna remained longer until 1915. The post Doberck 'new age' of the Hong Kong Observatory is discussed by MacKeown in Chapter 8.

MacKeown's book concludes with four Appendices, that is, a Gazetteer, Hong Kong Observatory publications (1884-1912) and the publications of J.I. Plummer and A.W. Doberck. There is also a list of notes to each chapter (thankfully here and not in the text) and a comprehensive index.

In conclusion, MacKeown's book is a classical piece of meticulous research and writing that befits a serious and world-renowned Hong Kong academic. Though eminently readable, it will not appeal, even if translated into Chinese, to the general public either in Hong Kong or elsewhere. Nevertheless, for the serious student of Hong Kong history, it is both rewarding and highly informative, and cleverly dotted with subtle innuendoes, opinions, thoughts and anecdotes.

Also to be congratulated is the Royal Asiatic Society which through its Hong Kong Studies Series (other titles within which are identified in the pre-title pages) published in co-operation with Hong Kong University Press, has ensured that Hong Kong's early history is not forgotten nor ignored. MacKeown's book is, however, especially important to me sitting and writing at home in storm-tossed and flood-ravaged Great Britain because, as the nation's citizens watch, every one, every night, the weather forecast on their television sets, the importance of weather forecasting is brought home to us all. This is also true for typhoon prone Hong Kong, the citizens of which have good reason to thank the staff past and present of the Hong Kong Observatory for their dedication, over the decades, in ensuring their greater safety. Finally, with a globally changing climate, the role of observatories worldwide will assume a greater and greater

importance for us all and MacKeown has eloquently reminded us of that importance.